THE HYBRID CLASSROOM: A CALL FOR OUTSIDE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE CLASSROOM

By

DAN SAURINO* ROBERT CLEMENTE** PENELOPE SAURINO*** TAMRA OGLETREE ****

* University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Department of Middle Grades, Secondary, and K-12 Education University, City Boulevard, Charlotte.
** Georgia State University, COE: Middle/Secondary & Instructional Technology, Lithia Springs High School, Lithia Springs, GA.
*** Limestone College, Department of Education, College Drive, Gaffney, SC.
**** University of West Georgia, College of Education, Department of Curriculum and instruction, Carrollton, Georgia.

ABSTRACT

As public school and university teachers, the authors are interested in strategies and techniques available to increase student engagement in content learning through the use of current technologies the students utilize outside of school within the classroom. They recognize the social constructs pertaining to student technology outside of school and student struggles in content literacy inside of school. The question is what strategies and techniques, cooperative learning, and teaching tactics might assist students in motivated engagement through the use of digital media. They believe the social constructs students build in the technological activities and multiple modalities in which they are engaged outside of school could aid in their learning of content inside of school, yet digital divides between students, teachers, and administrators are preventing the development of strategies and techniques that allow outside technologies in the classroom, and prevent the proper preparation of the students for success in the rapidly globalizing digital world. The authors response was to develop their own qualitative action research case studies to begin developing new technology curriculum for use in Hybrid classrooms. Their call is for others at all levels and content areas to join them in developing digital curriculum based on the technologies the students engage in outside of the classrooms so that such curriculum can become a standard part of the educational environment and practice.

Keywords: Hybrid Teaching, Technology Curriculum, Multiple Literacies, Multiliteracies, Multimodal, New Literacies, Digital Divide.

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions seek improved ways to educate students in their care. The responsibility to educate students amid social change falls to teachers who are held to rising educational expectations in the face of declining content ratings. Students' subversive disregard of the foregoing suggests that students who appear to struggle with content in school often mask a deeper issue. Outside of school, they are frequently quite literate in non-academic content, especially with regard to the new digital worlds of advancing technology and its devices (Hicks, 2009; Kist, 2003; Luke, 2005; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Adolescent activities outside of the classroom demonstrate high levels of digital engagement that challenge educators to critically evaluate traditional modes of instruction (Alvermann, 2001; Moje, 2000). Furthermore, the disparity between content literacy outside of school and performance inside of school appears to be widening, and we think that more than interest and engagement are to blame for these new educational breaches (Hull & Schultz, 2001; O'Brien, Stewart, & Saurino, 2002). Admittedly, schools have not traditionally been places for students to learn about constantly evolving digital media or how to integrate these digital technologies into their learning experiences (Gee, 1996). Secondary schools are, ironically, places that thwart if not outright deny access to new aspects of technology and, at the same time, new avenues of learning. Implementation of technology pedagogy within classrooms rarely occurs as anything more than the addition of digital bells and whistles (Luke, 1998). Schools themselves are causing digital divides; more than merely neglecting to connect students and teachers to digital worlds, schools outlaw digital devices that their administrators do not understand in terms of how

they might enhance education and, often as a result, feel they cannot control.

Learning is a social event where individuals learn various ideas, concepts, words, and content language from each other (Geekie, Cambourne, & Fitzsimmons, 1999; Kutz, 1997; Halliday, 1975). In such situations, students actively enjoy success in attaching meaning to content they deem important. Once bridges are formed from what they know to what they do not know, teaching and learning becomes less difficult and more meaningful. If social interaction in and out of school is increased through digital means, it should influence education in positive ways, unless inhibited by digital divides and restricted use of the technology students utilize most often.

Digital Hybrid Instruction

Middle and high school students busy themselves with the Internet, wireless cell phones, online video games, and other digital media, bridging new identities and ways of connecting to their world as never before (Hunt, 2007). Education continues to peer over the traditional precipice debating its descent rather than building the bridges to students' digital worlds, and as a result, students find ways to make their real world connections without the help of education. Natural curiosity leads students to investigate their world and words become the means for communicating that wonder (Cambourne, 1995). If content area reading instruction was considered to be radical pedagogy, then one would have to wonder what the outcome of the new trends in multiliteracies would be, perhaps underscoring the need for multimodal or multiliteracy models (Saurino & Saurino, 2006; Stewart, O'Brien, & Saurino, 2003).

As teachers, the authors' worthy and lofty goals direct them to new strategies and techniques available to increase students' understanding, critical-thinking, problem-solving skills, higher-order thinking, as well as to raise their grade point averages and, ultimately, their high-stakes test scores. On another plane of inquiry, the authors regularly find themselves questioning students' infatuation with and dependence on technology, and wonder why they embrace it to the point where they face suspension from school rather than give up their phones just because of a rule against them. The lure is great with wireless phones used as watches, cameras, text and picture transmitters, and internet connectors. Students are constantly networking to each other and even to strangers as their world becomes larger and, paradoxically, globally smaller with every key stroke or button push (Stubbs, 2008). Their understanding of adolescent content area reading and writing capabilities (literacy) is also challenged by increased student use of computer-mediated, digital, and visual communications that reach beyond the traditional conventions of linear speech and written text (Alvermann, 2001; Gee, 2003; Leu, 2000). The authors want to capture the motivation behind the technological lure and utilize available pedagogy, whether synchronous or asynchronous hybrid curriculum to teach all content areas utilizing a multimodal or multiliteracies approach that includes digital technology of interest to the students (O'Brien, 2001; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).

Electronically, the distances between North Carolina and California are not of consequence, and they are interested in the positive aspects of collaborating about teaching classes utilizing hybrid formats implementing the use of digital media in the content areas. The authors are interested in working together to develop digital teaching strategies and techniques that involve their students through Internet activities, content texts, small group activities, buddy systems, social-interaction formats and networking sites, individual differentiation, technology prompts, interactive blogs, digital technological tools, and other means. They want to compare and contrast the resulting data from different schools with different teachers teaching different classes.

Students take on digital identities learning about themselves and others in a world inside and outside of school. The authors also want to explore those nuances of identity association in teaching and learning whereby student interests are heightened by the use of technological devices, social networking sites, internet explorations, and how these connect to students' learning, literacy, and social awareness (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin,2005; O'Brien, 2001; Whilhelm & Freideman, 1998). At the same time that technology brings to life other worlds for

students, it also divides and separates, allowing students to disassociate with others in new ways. Also to be considered are new identities in technology that bring to the forefront new ethical concerns and issues pertaining to images, text, ownership, and personal identities, spaces, and associations.

Research Questions and Related Issues

By observation, they began to recognize and understand a number of socially constructed arenas pertaining to student interaction with technology, student content literacy and technology outside of school, and the contrast with students who struggle with content and literacies inside of school. Given the consideration that students are socially inclined, the authors question what strategies and collaborative techniques, cooperative learning, group activities, and peer teaching tactics might assist students in their learning in new classroom environments. Their students do not seem to be transferring social and technological skills developed outside of school back into school environments, usually because of teacher-student-administrator divides, and they question the reasons why they cannot bridge those divides, and look for solutions to the perplexing issue of these polarizing phenomena.

For curricular integration of learning in technological environments to take place, they need an understanding of the conditions that will implement technology appropriately, usefully, and beneficially for students and teachers because, "the popularity of multimedia applications makes this line of research crucial" (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000, p. 784). Their own individual case studies emanate from a constructionist epistemology and will be critical inquiry into the developments and analyses of strategies and techniques that can be used for hybrid online instruction and collaboration as a phenomenological approach in answering their research questions. Research questions revolve around issues of students and their content literacy practices and the identities they create and in which they operate outside and inside of school. Some of the research questions considered by the authors are as follows:

- How might we incorporate out of school digital media in the classroom activities?
- How much will student attitudes change toward their academic endeavors using socially interactive technologies in the various content areas?
- How might digitally interactive sessions outside of school affect student attitudes toward learning inside of school?
- How do students create and operate in digital identities, and how important are these identities in their content literacy and learning?
- What are the new ethical and socially acceptable standards associated with new technological ways of online collaboration and classroom interactions?

Answering the Research Questions

The authors notice gaps in the course of their review of research literature related to strategies and techniques for middle and high school regarding the concepts of using technology and joint activities or digital networking in classrooms. Certain components, especially from the world of higher-education, have found their way into classrooms such as online lecturing, PowerPoint presentations, posting assignments online, Internet researching, and embryonic forms of conferencing for out of class assignments (Ogletree, Saurino, & Johnson, 2009; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Student awareness and knowledge of such socio-technological aspects of student life in the classroom prompts their exploration into the pedagogical possibilities. Authors are intrigued by the social constructs students build in the content activities and multiple identities in which they are engaged outside of school and how these might aid in their content learning. However, lecturing online is still lecturing. Viewing adolescent social constructs and how they might be used in content literacy and learning is a much broader scope than they first anticipated.

Their beginnings started in their own classrooms. Authors begin their quest to answer the research questions in action research qualitative case studies in their own classrooms. They used publically available Internet activities, Blogs, social networking sites, video conferencing, recording and sound equipment, projection, computer specialty programs for recording materials and presenting them, and other forms of technology available in the classroom.

However, in addition, students have the opportunity to engage in outside of school digital media with cell phone connections, academic email accounts, blog responses, social networking, video conferencing, Internet research, and other outside of classroom technologies as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. They are also interested in the process of preparing for such activities and other technology, content areas, and grade levels from kindergarten through university, that have not been explored before.

They hope that students, working together with in-school and out-of-school technologies in a hybrid learning environment, will probe deeper into subject matter beyond mere knowledge acquisition to synthesizing material, evaluating actions and responses, analyzing produced work, and applying learned strategies to other disciplines. The authors believe technological advances can produce interconnections never before allowed in educational learning communities, and the devices and communication they produce transcend contextual applications beyond the content itself.

In this action research studies, qualitative methodologies are used to collect and analyze data, and produce thick, rich descriptions of the strategies, technology utilizations, student responses, teacher observations, and journals of the preparations and processes. Authors also want to observe how students deal with these new technological identities, environments, and communities that they create. They think students will imagine and construct new digital/technical connections to each other to foster their own learning because of their interest and engagement in the digital media integrations. They also know that the questions surrounding the project will spawn more questions, and have no predetermined outcomes in mind, only the hope that students will again ignite their imaginations and develop their love of learning. They think students will learn more, remember more, and have more fun working together in the technological connections to each other where content can come alive for them.

Call for Outside Technologies in the Classroom

The call is for all teachers, regardless of grade level or content to begin looking at what technology their students are currently engaged in outside of school, and begin developing strategies and techniques that produce classrooms utilizing both traditional and Hybrid formats that motivate and meet the needs of the digitally savvy students. Authors believe they have moved into a new era where the focus is no longer on textbooks and classroom resources, but on multimodal multiliteracies, globalization, and the Internet, where meaning-making now involves being able to read and write not only print text but also e-texts that include color, sound, movement, and visual representations. It seems there is much they need to learn about how different students draw on these different symbolic, or semiotic systems to make meaning of their content areas. How do students interact with these different systems? What strategies and skills do they use to teach them? What do they need to teach their students in order to help them become proficient utilizers of today's technology and today's digidenties that draw on multiple semiotic systems to represent meaning, and prepare them for jobs that do not currently exist? The authors believe these are the significant research questions that they must urgently address. They need not address studies of fragmented aspects of outdated or ethereal learning theories, but focus on the processes of meaning-making and the application of current learning theories to outside of school technologies that can become the curriculum of tomorrow. Education is certainly a far more complex process in the twenty-first century than it was in the late decades of the twentieth century, and the change is increasing, not decreasing. It is imperative, they believe, that teachers broaden their view of what meaning-making is in today's world and their learners' worlds. The digital world is here to stay, and it is a highly learning-dependent world in which students need highly refined skills and access to multiple strategies that go beyond current learning theories and paper-based print texts (Turbill, 2001a; 2001b; 2003).

We must face the emergent fact that the increase in high-stakes testing, annual yearly progress, and lack of adequate teacher support has forced more focus on learning theory, models, and frameworks that increase the chaotic application of focus on technology strategies and techniques. The life of the teacher is still sadly crippled by the manacles of mandated curriculum and the chains of

student performance on standardized tests. Teachers live on lonely islands of mandated learning theory in the midst of a vast ocean of digital possibilities. Teachers are still languishing in the shadows of digitally divided American society and find themselves exiled in the corners of their own classrooms. So the call today is for a paradigm shift, a new and extensive look at how to move from a concentration on the external institutions of learning theory to the internal metacognition of digital meaning-making and how we might assess such in our Hybrid classrooms.

In a sense, it is time for the nation to cash a check. When the architects of American republic wrote that no child would be left behind in the educational system, they were signing a promissory note to which every American child was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all students would be guaranteed the inalienable right to a free and equitable education. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her children's education continues to be encumbered with learning theory from a myriad of sources instead of funding the one criterion that is most important, how well students make meaning in a digital age as a yardstick for all pedagogy. Instead of honoring a sacred obligation, America has given students and teachers a bad check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But, we refuse to believe that the bank of American education is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of the nation. So we call on the cashing of this check, and a paradigm shift in education and educational research that looks at the result of learning theory in terms of how proficiently the students are utilizing the technologies that encompass their lives in the classroom curriculum that has been established as the standard. Have we gone overboard with the metaphors again, or is it constitutionally an inalienable right to incredibly, irrefutably, and magnificently go overboard with the metaphors?

The authors have also come to this moment to remind America of the fierce urgency of acting now. They have no time to engage in the luxury of cooling debates or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to rise from the desolate valley of teaching to the test to the sunlit path of determining how well the students are learning in classrooms that are not utilizing the technologies of the rest of the world. Now is the time to open the doors of understanding to all of the students, and leave no child behind in their opportunity to be part of the paradigm shift to digital media in the educational systems. They are not at an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the current educational stream will now somehow become content will have a rude awakening if the nation continues with business as usual. Let us not wallow in the valley of disbelief in the ability to instigate change because in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, we still have a vision. It is a vision deeply rooted in the digital educational dream. The authors have a vision that one day the nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its educational purpose by the content of its technological character. This is the hope and faith with which they return to the annals of their educational vocations and begin the research process that will be the ammunition to fight the battle of student-teacher-administrator disconnect that can transform the jangling digital discords of their educational systems into a beautiful symphony of a paradigm shift to the use of outside technologies in their classrooms. The call is for their research to join in this quest, to develop new strategies and techniques that incorporate digital media, and to conduct research, publish, and join the fight to bring into the classroom the technological world in which the students live.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Dan Saurino has been preparing middle-grades and secondary science and mathematics teachers at the University level since 1998. He specializes in methods (strategies and techniques for teaching) and classroom research (Collaborative Interactive Group Action Research). He was awarded a Doctorate from the University of Georgia in 1998. Since then he has taught at Virginia Tech, E. Oregon University, University of W. Georgia, and currently teaches at Western Carolina University.

Tamra Ogletree graduated with a PhD from the University of West Georgia in 2006 and has been teaching at the University of West Georgia since 1998. Some of the many positions she has filled at West Georgia include Professional Development School Director, Director of the Child Development Center, and She is currently the co-director of the Cherokee Rose Writing Project. Her professional interests include literacy, writing, learning styles, and social justice.